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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000977

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: CONSUL GENERAL'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON ECUMENICAL  
PATRIARCH

REF: A. ISTANBUL 0873

[1](#)B. ISTANBUL 0942

[1](#)C. 06 ANKARA 6593

[1](#)D. 06 ISTANBUL 0524

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I recounted his most recent round of meetings in Ankara with Turkish government officials during the Consul General's November 6 introductory call. Though he had been well received, he had yet to see results on key issues such as re-opening Halki Seminary and returning expropriated, minority foundation properties. Expressing his trust in PM Erdogan and President Gul, Bartholomew blamed lack of progress concerning these issues on rising extreme nationalism. Consul General reiterated continued USG support for the Patriarchate and assured Bartholomew of her personal commitment to promoting religious freedom during her tenure in Istanbul. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) During a November 6 introductory call on the Ecumenical Patriarch, Consul General assured Bartholomew that one of her most important responsibilities was to represent and promote American values of freedom of religion and human rights. As a result, the USG will continue to pay close attention to the related issues affecting the patriarchate. Bartholomew expressed his appreciation for continued USG interest and stressed, "we need you." Helping the patriarchate fulfill its ecumenical spiritual mission was in Turkey's interest, he asserted, because it helps to project a western image of a free and truly democratic country.

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Patriarch's Calls on GOT Officials  
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[1](#)3. (C) Reiterating intentions he had described to Undersecretary Burns in September (ref A), Bartholomew stated he wants to solve the patriarchate's problems through a sincere and direct dialogue with the GOT. That is why he had gone to Ankara two times in October (ref B) to meet with government officials. His most recent trip on October 30 and 31 included calls on Justice Minister Sahin, Education Minister Celik, Foreign Minister Babacan, Interior Minister Atalay and the State Minister responsible for foundations Hayati Yazici. Bartholomew acknowledged he was very well received and that the cabinet members had expressed goodwill, were kind and had good intentions. However, he lamented that this had also been the case when he spoke to government officials in 2002 and yet nothing had changed. "When will they act on these intentions?" he asked rhetorically.

14. (C) Bartholomew recounted that Education Minister Celik had previously stated that if it were up to him, Halki Seminary could be opened within 24 hours. Asked whether any officials had an explanation for the lack of progress on resolving the patriarchate's problems, Bartholomew replied they had none. He noted they simply said, "You are right and we feel ashamed to receive you without having anything to give you." The Patriarch disclosed he had left two letters with Celik: one concerning the re-opening of Halki Seminary and the other addressing Greek minority, primary and secondary school buildings, which have been closed due to diminished enrollment and which, under Turkish law, cannot be used for non-educational purposes.

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Property Expropriations  
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15. (C) Turning to the issue of expropriated properties, Bartholomew noted he had left another letter with State Minister Yazici, including pictures of 24 church properties that were confiscated by the General Directorate of Foundations (GDF) and are now either rented out or abandoned in a decrepit state. One of these properties, adjoining the Church of St. George, was turned into a billiard hall where associated noise levels regularly interfere with church services. "Why is it rented out when we are here?" bemoaned Bartholomew. He pointed out that the new Law on Foundations passed in parliament last year but later vetoed by then President Sezer (ref C) would not/not enable the return of these properties. Citing a recent increase in property confiscations by the GDF, he suspected the government was trying to take as much as it could before a new Foundations law increased restrictions on the expropriation of minority

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foundation properties.

16. (C) Bartholomew informed the Consul General that he was expecting the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to soon decide on the critical Buyukada Greek Orphanage property dispute (ref D). In order to protect church foundation properties, he had decided to follow the recommendation of his legal advisors and bring all property-related cases to the ECHR. He regretted having to take this action but argued he has no choice when the state takes properties out of the hands of its own citizens. Bartholomew underscored that he wants Ankara to recognize that the Greek minority does not represent a threat. "We are part of this society, we are citizens," he exclaimed.

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Rising Nationalism  
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17. (C) Characterizing PM Erdogan as a courageous man with good intentions, Bartholomew confessed he was happy to see the Prime Minister prevail over "other powers" during the presidential election crisis of last spring. He believed that both Erdogan and President Gul could be counted on, if left to act in accordance with their own will. He attributed their lack of assistance to both resistance within the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and to extreme nationalistic tendencies within society. The ubiquitous, giant Turkish flags are a new phenomenon, noted Bartholomew, and though patriotism can be a good thing, nationalism that excludes and denies the right to exist to others is not.

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Some Good News...  
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18. (C) Regarding the Higher Court of Appeals' (Yargitay's) June statement on the Patriarch's (lack of) ecumenicity, Bartholomew confirmed that nothing of practical consequence had yet to arise but cautioned the statement remains in the

public record. Consul General pointed out she regularly raises this issue with the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor who assures her he will not act on any claims against the Patriarch concerning this matter. Bartholomew also praised Istanbul Governor Guler for allowing minority foundations permission to proceed with board elections, which he described as a very positive gesture.

WIENER